DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 460 CS 213 368

AUTHOR Mowery, Carl D., Jr.
TITLE Teaching Composition in Prisons: Methods and Materials.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Correctional Education; Higher Education; *Instructional Materials; Questionnaires; Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Illinois; Kentucky; Maximum Security Facilities; Missouri; Teaching Research; Tennessee

ABSTRACT

A pilot study gathered information on materials and methods used by writing instructors teaching in prisons in Tennessee, Kentucky, Illinois, and Missouri via a questionnaire. The classes taught by the respondents were all at the college level, were sponsored by various universities and colleges, and all but two were taught at maximum security prisons. Responses indicated that: (1) instructors used a wide variety of handbooks or texts commonly found in college classrooms; (2) no course packets were used; (3) audio-visual aids were used often; (4) the most effective writing subjects were topics of immediate importance to the inmates; (5) standard prewriting activities were used; (6) rigid prison schedules interfered with a personal approach to teaching writing; (7) the inmate-students exhibited a wider variety of ability than one would expect to find on the college campus; (8) peer critiquing was successful in only one class--the only one that was coeducational; and (9) inmates were older and more experienced than most college students. A major difference between the prison and college classrooms was in the language used. One instructor permitted a certain amount of street talk in the all-male setting of his course but not in the students' written essays except as direct quotes in dialogue (the students accepted this without difficulty). Overall, it was found that some of the noticeable benefits of the writing programs to the inmate-students included increased participation in prison newspapers and creative writing activities. Four conclusions are drawn: (1) that the nature of the instructional material used has little effect on program or student success; (2) that the success of the programs largely depends upon support and encouragment of the school and prison administrations; (3) that instructors must make a genuine effort; and (4) that inmates also must be willing to make serious adjustments in their personal attitudes and outlooks. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Carl D. Mowery, Jr
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED346460

Teaching Composition in Prisons: Methods and Materials

by

Carl D. Mowery, Jr.

Several years ago I accepted the challenge to teach English classes at the Kentucky State Penitentiary, teaching both literature and writing classes. When I went into the prison, I took with me methods and materials that I had used with some success in my campus classes. After teaching there for a few months it became apparent to me that some of these were not going to work as well inside the walls as they did on the outside. Then it was my task to experiment, to eliminate things and add others mostly by a trial and error method. I asked for help and suggestions from those who had been there before me, but even this did not prepare me for the full effect of the differences between the prison classes and campus classes. What I would like to present today is a sampling of information on materials and methods that are used by instructors from prisons in Tennessee, Kentucky, Illinois, and Missouri. This information comes from a questionnaire sent to selected participants who consented to participate in this pilot project and from personal experiences.

The classes taught by the respondants were all at the college level and were sponsored by such institutions as Murray State University, Kaskaskia Junior College, Roosevelt University, and Southern Illinois University Carbondale. The prisons were mostly maximum security institutions, with only two responses from medium security institutions; none taught at minimum

CS213368

security prisons. The degree goals in these programs include AA, AS, BA, and MA degrees. Class sizes varied from a maximum beginning number of 30 to a minimum size of 18. Most instructors reported a dropout rate of approximately 40%, with some as high as 50%. Two respondants reported experiences in women's prisons, one of these in an experimental co-ed class situation!

The materials used in the classes varied widely. The most selected text for writing classes was Skwire Writing with a Thesis. Other texts include the McCrimmon Writing with a Purpose and Hayakawa Language in Thought and Action. Several instructors did not use a specific rhetoric but based their classes on a handbook. These include the Little Brown Handbook, McGraw Hill Handbook, the Borzoi Handbook, and the Harbrace Handbook. Another type of text selected was the combination rhetoric and handbook, of which the Tibbetts Stategies of Rhetoric with Handbook is an example. Some instructors used additional essay anthologies for these classes. Rhetorical Considerations by Brent and Lutz, and The Rinehart Reader of Wyrick and Slaughter are examples. The texts that I selected for my own classes included Duke's Writing Through Sequence and various handbooks.

The texts used by the inmate-students are supplied by the providing institution or the prisons themselves, with much of the costs underwritten by government grants of one type or another. The tuition for the men in my classes was paid through Pell Grant arrangements. Since the university and the prison were undergoing some financial pressure when I was involved in the program, one of my criteria for text selection was to find the

least expensive text available. On more than one occasion the bookstore manager and I went through the warehouse gleaning old handbooks for prison use. Often these were the Harbrace handbook in early editions or slightly damaged ones that did not sell off the shelf. The handbook was one of the more regularly used texts in my classes, and students frequently looked things up during classes. Of equal importance to the students was the dictionary that I obtained for them. Again the store manager and I would look for older and cheaper copies of these books for the prison classes.

An interesting absence in class materials is the lack of course packets used by any of the respondants. Several instructors supplied handouts as the occasion required. I assume that it was for logistical and financial reasons that packets were not used at all.

Extra classroom materials include the regular use of audio-visual aids. Many reported using film strips, films and video tapes as prompts in writing classes. In several of my writing classes I brought video tapes from which essays were written. A topic that was very successful was boxing matches. I taped Mike Tyson's early fights for use in my class. In one assignment the class viewed the match and then wrote a newspaper article based on that viewing. They were given only one chance to see the fight. This challenged them to be quick in their analysis and to remember details after the fight was over so the essay could be written.

Martha Sinn, Farmington, MO, reported that use of films and film strips in her classes was often thwarted by delays in receipt of these articles from the central distribution offices. But when these were available the students responded well to them.

A showing of the HBO movie Dead Man Out proved to be another successful event. This movie depicted a prisoner who was being treated by a psychologist so that once he was deemed fully sane, the prison could then execute him. This movie evoked much debate and discussion. They were a bit cynical about the prison system itself and this came out during the discussion.

The most effective subjects were topics of immediate importance to the inmates. John Offut, Nashville, TN, said that current events projects were not successful in his classes, because the inmates were more involved in personal concerns than in the concerns of the broader outside world. However, Martha Sinn reports that she used current events in her classes with some success. While I never personally used current events as a topic for essays, I would often let the class discuss news topics. The Oliver North hearings evoked some rather strong reactions from the men in my classes, several of whom were former military and were disturbed by his equivocations and lies. The Jim and Tammy Bakker situation was also grist for some rather interesting discussions. Some of the inmates had found religion since coming to prison, and they were not pleased with Bakker's behavior.

In getting inmate students to prepare for writing essays many of the respondants said that the standard prewriting exercises were used, including free writing, brainstorming, listing, outlining. Revising and rewriting were used by all respondants. The least effective technique used in writing classes was the peer critique. Several respondants mentioned trying this, and only one reported success. In my own classes I ran into the problem of the stoic, silent inmate, unwilling to share anything with his classmates. The atmosphere in the prison yard is such that the men keep their inner feelings to themselves; they do not want any weakness shown to anyone. They could not risk even the seemingly non-threatening practice of critiquing another's essays. One inmate remarked to me, "We can't ask those kind of questions. Nobody wants to talk about that with anybody in here!" I tried this only once.

Pedagogical techniques are not the only facet of prison teaching that can create problems. Daily scheduling interferes with a more personal approach to teaching writing. There is a difficulty to getting to talk with inmates about their essays. The prison schedules are much more rigid than campus schedules. When a class is over, the inmates leave very quickly and there is no time for after-class conferences. As Jay Hilliard of SIUC says, "There was little opportunity to talk to individual students, no hanging around after class, no office hour conferences." For those of us who depend on this kind of interaction to assist students who are having difficulties, this is a frustration. Several times in my classes I would take large

blocks of time and dismiss part of the class, keeping the rest. Then in short one-on-one conferences I would get a brief moment to discuss essays with the students. Some of the struggling students were helped by even these short conferences. But these can be a bit unsettling. Once in such a conference an inmate divulged the fact that he had stabbed a guard in an escape attempt, and another showed me his scarred arms from years of IV drug use.

Other scheduling problems occur routinely, if not expectedly. These are the lock-downs that arise from prison disturbances. In my experiences this occurred three times, twice for weather. The inmates were not allowed out of the cell blocks in unattended groups when heavy fog covered the yard and it could not be seen from all vantage points. The third was as a result of a fight within the prison population, when the lock-down was required to let tempers cool. At the Kentucky State Penitentiary, the classes were merely eliminated from the schedule. For some instructors added classes were worked into the schedule as time permitted. But Tim Gould reported that at Menard Correctional Complex, when classes are suspended for lock-down, they are picked up after the lock-down, as though nothing happened. He said that on occasion 16-week semesters have run for as long as 25 to 30 weeks.

In my classes at the prison, I ran into a much wider variety of student ability than would be expected on campus. This is because there are no basic classes at the college level, nor separation by ability for the 101-102 classes. Everyone who

enters the program goes into whatever class is available at the point of entry. I have had to teach the very basic rudiments in what was called a 102 class. Since I did not have much individual time for these students, I know that I lost some of them because they were simply overwhelmed by the restrictions of the grammar and other class requirements. Some did stick it out and were better writers at the end of the semester, even if they did not pass the class. I have had experienced writers in 101 classes who could have been bored with the elementary nature of the beginning assignments of the class. I had to work with these differences to maintain a sense of unity in the class.
Prison classes can at times be a bit more confrontational. These students are more assertive and contentious as a general rule. Wally Swann, Murray State University, said, "Prisoners tend to be more 'pugnacious,' both in discussion and on questions concerning grades and/or assignments." They become more protective of their assignments because very often they spend much time on the assignments and therefore have more of themselves invested in them.

One special response must be noted at this point. Angie Jones, who taught at Logan Correctional Center in Illinois, had an experimental class set-up which was co-educational, with approx. 20% female. She reported that some of the students in her class had enrolled as a way to 'date' other students. It was in this class also that two male students bolted from the room in the middle of class and engaged another inmate in a fight over a female inmate. She also reported that her peer critiques were

successful, with one provision that those students who had a history of being confrontational would be kept apart and not allowed to share essays.

Major differences between inmate-students and campus students are age and experience levels. For the most part the inmates are older than the typical campus freshman or sophomore. They also have a much wider range of experiences from which to draw for essay assignments. Their lives have been more frantic and filled with unique events, some of which are difficult for an outsider to fathom. As an example, in a class of mine, I used the standard dilemma issue as the genesis for an essay. My campus classes were writing essays about trying to decide with whom to go to the prom and in what color tuxedo. In my prison class that same semester an essay from an inmate discussed the dilemma of whether or not to turn himself in and take a chance at being charged with complicity to commit murder or to run away and try to evade the law.

In my own classes a major difference was in the language allowed. On campus, the students and I would maintain a more socially acceptable level of conversation. But in the all male classroom of the prison I allowed these students to loosen up a bit, and as appropriate, I would also. But because the essay assignments were more formal exercises, street talk was not permitted. If a student felt that such language was needed, it had to be in quotes and in an appropriate context. Students in my classes accepted this provision without difficulty.

Some of the noticeable benefits for the inmate-students reported by the respondants include the increased involvement in the prison newspaper by those who were in writing classes. Many of these people became active in collecting, editing, and compiling the in-house newspaper. At the Kentucky State Penitentiary the inmates publish The Castle several times a year. The editorial staff was mostly men who were in composition classes at one time or another. Being active in this gives the inmates a positive outlet for creative energy and also allows them to exercise some leadership in positive and constructive ways.

Also students are awakened to the joys of creative writing while in composition classes. Leon, who was in a class of mine, wrote, "The comp 1 & 2 courses struck a long silent chord in me. We were given a choice of topics and allowed to 'just do it.' spinning whatever web we could. It was a liberating experience for me." Since this class, he has gone on to write a novel based on his experiences in VietNam and is currently working on some short stories. John Offut also reports that a former student of his has written and published two detective novels. Others are successful in writing articles for various specialty magazines.

Tim Gould reports that an instructor at the Menard Correctional Center, Illinois, assisted a class in the compilation and publication of a class anthology of essays. This was sent to prison officials and officials from the sponsoring college. The students were very pleased with this distribution. In one class of mine, a similar effort was mounted. The class

selected, edited, and arranged essays from the semester's assignments. As instructor I got university help to compile and bind the final booklet. The men involved with the project were pleased. It got some local press notice.

In both these situations the inmates were encouraged to develop their creative writing abilities. With support from administration and writing teachers similar projects have the potential to show positive results in the future. Martha Sinn said that some of her students would enter writing contests as a special class project. These moments stay with the students longer than might be supposed. I am still in contact with several former students who on occasion will mention the essay booklet.

I can draw four conclusions from this pilot survey. First, the nature of the materials used has little effect on the success of the individual program or individual student. Most instructors who made comments on this indicated that their approach to class was similar to their campus classes. They used the same text in prison that was used on campus, since they were familiar with it. No one admitted to lowering any standards for prison classes from the campus class standards, so the same text worked very well. Even in my own gleaning method of text selection, I used texts that I had used or was using on campus, and that I found useful for the kinds of classes that I taught.

Second, the success of any program is dependant in large part on the support and encouragement of the school and prison administrations. At the Kentucky State Penitentiary the

principals that I worked with were very understanding, supportive, and generous in allowing my classes to work in sometimes special ways, different from the regular patterns of prison classes. Other instructors have reported similar feelings. Tim Gould, supervisor of the college program at Menard Center, is very supportive of the program, the teachers, and the inmates who were involved in the classes there.

Third, from comments received from instructors who have experience inside the walls, I conclude that the instructor must be genuine. Prisoners are more perceptive than we might credit them as being. It does not take long for them to spot someone who is disingenuous. While teaching at KSP another instructor would often come to class late, unprepared, leave early, and on occasion call in sick. The students did not mince words in their expressions of disgust at this. Additionally, their dissatisfaction at that instructor was often brought into my classes, further complicating my task.

Finally, it has become obvious that for any of this to succeed the inmates must also be willing to make some serious adjustments in their personal attitudes and outlooks. One inmate, Steve, reports, "After serving a few years of my sentence the reaity of knowing that I would be institutionalized for a long time began to set in. The only contact I had with the outside world was through correspondence which would not have been so bad if I had been able to read and write." He then enrolled in the GED program, finished it, and continued with the AA program offered by MSU. Then he investigated, entered and

will soon finish the BIS (Bachelor of Independent Studies) program, also from MSU. The important aspect of this is that the BIS is done entirely via correspondence. These kinds of courses are difficult at best, so his success inside the prison is all the more impressive. Others have made changes in lifestyle and outlook while still in prison, that may serve them well once they are released.

A final comment. This country is creating ever-increasing prison populations at a rate that is first in the world. To continue to incarcerate men and women without plans for rehabilitation contributes to the long term problem with short term "solutions." I believe that in many cases inmates can be rehabilitated if the opportunities are made available to them. Prison educational programs are but a small part of the solution to a very large problem in the United States. And teaching writing classes is a step in the right direction.

Delivered at CCCC Convention March 19, 1992, Cincinnati, OH.